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FORGETFUL. SHORT ATTENTION SPAN. UNABLE TO CONCENTRATE. I wasn't always like this, always lingering on the surface.

Over time I began to see the same problem all around me, so many people complaining of bad memory. I realized then what I had been longing for. I longed to *think*, to sustain a thought – just one – without being distracted, and to think that thought to its furthest reach. What had been holding me back was a malady: a fear of depths rather than heights.

The novelist José Saramago would call this the Age of Blindness.

Plague sweeps through a nameless city, infecting its nameless
zens. People suddenly go blind, for no explainable reason
l without any warning. This is the contagion of Saramago's
ndness, only it's not the ordinary loss of sight, not the

ndness of enveloping
kness, but one in
ich all you can see is
ominous and
penetrable whiteness.
ead of seeing nothing,
s as though everything
be seen in every
tant – a blindness more
lign than any we've
r known.

In this city of blindness,
everything is ravaged.
pe and murder abound.
rpses lie about
buried, and there is
food, no clean water;
everything is smeared
th human filth. The
y is destroyed and
lapsed by the very
ople who built it.
hat drives them?
I once heard it said that
ie sight comes from
e heart.



I had always imagined blindness would be a time for introspection, a time for *the gaze* to turn back inward. Saramago's blind frenzy is different. Consciousness remains at eye level. The afflicted see only as far as the whites of their eyes, and there they remain, trapped at the surface of themselves, while they continue to hold on to the illusion of sight.

The illusion is a fear of introspection, a blindness of memory, tradition, history: a blindness of rationality. The character referred to only as the girl with dark glasses says, "Inside us there is something that has no name, that something is what we are." In the white blindness, that something is lost. Or perhaps it's the cause of the blindness.

The Buddha, in the Fire Sermon: "The eye is a flame. Forms are aflame. Consciousness at the eye is aflame. Contact at the eye is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the eye – experienced as pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain – that too is aflame."

IMAGES: JOHN DARWELL

He led me back into the depths. Romantic ideas of what we are. Illusions and reality. Saramago doesn't fail to remind us that people can get used to anything, especially if they have ceased to be people.

He has created his allegory, *The Cave*, building a mega-mall on the ruins of Plato. It is The Center, a temple of commercial worship and a government all in one, a self-proclaimed divine power and the last place where god can still be found. It is the home of illusion, propagating and enforcing illusion as a way of life. The idea of the citizen is lost to antiquity, replaced by membership. Members of the Center actually live within the mall, never needing to leave their totally controlled mental and physical environment, their fortunes rising and falling with the market. If Saramago's imagination seems to be in excess, then it's time that you visited suburban California.

Pitted against the Center is an old potter, whose livelihood is threatened by the Center's ruthless commercial policy. Trapped in the world of hard economic facts, the potter finds that he no longer serves a "useful purpose," that his pottery no longer has an "exchange value" or "use value" to keep up with the ever-changing "dictates of the market."

The poor potter: he has to leave his village to go live in the Center; his old-world wisdom, his compassion, his closeness to nature and his genuine humanity no longer mean a thing. He becomes a *poor potter* because he is of a dispossessed people. A little too romantic, a little too wise, they prefer to passively retreat to the shadows of the world. They are a transitional group who have not gathered their power beyond a nagging voice from inside: *I will not accept this indignity.*



I have a yearning for simplicity, and a childhood dream to disappear into the jungle. I'm struck by the term "go back" to nature. So many have lost their homes, their land, their villages, their trees – their art of life. A people who have been stripped of their human touch. A potter's sensitive hands that once knew, just by touching the clay, that it is the right composition, have been replaced by machines.

I don't want to lose that brain-in-the-hands, as Saramago calls it. If you play an instrument or work with your hands, you may have noticed your hands moving of their own accord. That is perhaps the human touch? And what if we lose it and become all brain-in-the-head? Machine hands to machine minds.

What's next? We find ourselves in caves within caves. First there was Plato's cave, where we were chained to our struggle with illusion, doomed to see reality only in shadows and echoes cast into our darkness. That cave was buried and another one built, one in which we accepted a Mephistophelean pact to live within an illusion. Who knows what cave we might build on top of that? Let's just call this third cave the cave of the world.

"The strawberries are losing their color, it won't be long before they are as white outside as they are beginning to be inside, which is why they taste like something that tastes of nothing."

Refqa Abu Remaileh